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APHULKARI FROM BHATINDA

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In A PHULKARI FROM BHATINDA Professor H.S. Gill has presented a series of dramatic events in the life of Preeto unfolding a panorama of conceptual structures around the basic thresholds of marriage, birth and death when she is offered a PHULKARI as a token of auspicious happiness and fulfilled vows. This simple narrative reads like a primer of Indian sociology. It is followed by two analytical chapters—Preeto's Cultural Heritage: the Legends of the Punjab, and Preeto's Phulkari. Signs and Significance, supplemented by a series of thirty-six reproductions in colour. The logical correlates of the metaphysical precautions with the fundamental psychic urges of our people deduced by Professor Gill have never been so transparent and it is quite possible that the neglect to know ourselves was due primarily to the earlier simplistic adage of native superstitions. This study should go a long way in clearing the fog of our ethnological misunderstanding.

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Bhatinda is a wild and mysterious region of the Punjab. Its hardy peasants and romantic heroes form an integral part of the ballads sung by village bards on many a festive occasion. On his retreat from Anandpur Guru Gobind Singh reposed in these ferocious jungles and while the Mughal army was in hot pursuit, he addressed his famous Epistle of Victory, Zafar Nama, to the emperor of Hindusthan, Alamgir Aurangzeb. The adventurous spirit of the denizens of the area has never since succumbed to any physical or political pressure.

The story of the Phulkari from Bhatinda is the story of the happiness and the hazards, of the ecstasy and the terror that a girl from Bhatinda is confronted with throughout her life. Phulkari is the auspicious, sacred head cover embroidered in red, gold, green or blue by the village girl for her marriage, for the happy occasion of the birth of her son and for the last most important event of a golden death in ripe age when she leaves the stage after a life of fulfilment and peaceful transfer of all the expectations, hopes and achievements that has been her lot during her earthly years. Every stitch and every colour of this phulkari is culturally significant. The forms of sparrows, pigeons, peacocks, crows, parrots, snakes, tigers or elephants are semiological forms and present a conceptual network of metaphysical beliefs and precautions that are necessary for her to plod through the vicissitudes of social intercourse. Let us begin with her marriage.

When Preeto was fifteen her mother casually reminded her husband, Sardar Baghel Singh, Nambardar, of their responsibility. Baghel Singh had never really thought about it seriously. He was too busy with his public life but he had liked the young son, Dipa, of Sardar Kartar Singh, Zaildar of Basarke, with whom he had had personal dealings for a fairly long time. Preeto's grandmother had always wanted to have relations with that family. Since the *got* of the mother and father of Preeto were different from those of the parents of Dipa, there was no social or clanish obstacle.*

Preeto's uncle, Maghar Singh, was assigned the role of the so-called go-between. He knew the family well. One of the cousins of Sardar Kartar Singh was his personal friend. And, of course, there was the *nain*, the barber's wife, who was supposed to know all the intricate relationships of the well-to-do families around. She knew in detail the various dealings at the marriages of practically all of the uncles and boys in that family. So, within a matter of few weeks everybody was at work. The rumour of the possible engagement of the daughter of Baghel Singh Nambardar with the son of Kartar Singh Zaildar was on every lip. The friends hailed it as a noble union between two prosperous houses and the jealous eyes could not help betraying their annoyance at such a strong relationship. Good wishes and evil eyes withstanding, the elders in the two families were consulted and a day was set for the formal engagement. Preeto and Dipa were aware of what was going on in hissed voices but nobody ever asked their opinion.

On the appointed day, Preeto's uncle, the barber and three cousins reached Basarke with hundred and one rupees and a basket full of *gur*. They were received ceremoniously. Oil was poured on both sides of the gate of the *Haweli* by the local *nain*. Preeto's uncle gave her five rupees. In the evening all the elders of the family and the village assembled on a platform covered with beautiful *daris* and bed sheets. Dipa's maternal uncle had especially come for this very auspicious occasion. After the prayer before the holy Granth and the "permission" from the Guru, the uncle presented Dipa with hundred and one rupees and a small dry fruit, *shuhara*, that he bit into and gave the rest to his younger brother and a couple of other unmarried cousins with the good wishes that they too might be engaged soon.

The engagement had been solemnised. The girls in the women's quarters sang and congratulated Dipa's mother. She in turn gave a handful of *patase* and some rice to every invitee. The elders presented a token gift called *niondra* of one, five, eleven or twenty-one rupees according to the degree of their relation with the family. Once this ceremony was over and all the gifts were duly noted in the marriage *wahi*, there was lot of drinking.

* The author is indebted to his students, Manjit Bassi, Baljit Dhalwal and Ranjit Singh Bajwa for the use of their field-notes to check the details of the ceremonies included here.

Preeto's uncle and the party returned home the same evening. They were given *sandhara* for Preeto that included her red dress, *salwar*, *kamiz* and *dupatta*, a pair of gold bracelets, *shuhare*, *patase*, coconut and other sweets. A simple ceremony was held when the nain gave these presents to Preeto who was sitting with her friends and relatives. Preeto's mother was the happiest person. A patasa of *shagan* was given to every young girl so that their parents too should be able to arrange their engagements in the near future.

Zaildar Kartar Singh's son had been engaged to the daughter of Nambardar Baghel Singh. It was naturally a major event for the two families concerned and also for all those who were connected with them in one way or the other. While this union was a boon to the friends, it was a considerable threat to the enemies. The Nambardar was taking it easy and was contemplating, if at all, for the marriage to take place sometimes after harvest. However, Preeto's mother was anxious and wanted to avoid all further delay. As the saying goes, there were as many tongues as there were mouths. Already the evil eyes had started casting their unwanted shadows. There were *black tongues* all over. Rumours were carefully planted by the "well-meaning" old women of the neighbourhood that Dipa's mother, Preeto's mother-in-law-to-be, was Zaildar's second wife. There was no issue from the first marriage and the Zaildar married for the second time in a family that was not reputed for charity. She was a hell of a woman, a real *churel*, a witch. When she had had enough at her hands, Dipa's elder brother's wife went home and returned after three years when Zaildar himself went to his son's in-laws for reconciliation. Others intervened that it was the fault of the daughter-in-law. She had no respect for the elders and at every opportunity was ready for a *kalesh*. On the other side, Dipa's mother was told with all "sympathy" that Preeto was not so pretty as claimed by the *vicholan*, the go-between. Last year she fell sick and who knows what kind of sickness it was. Another "friendly" opinion was that the Nambardar was a miserly elder fellow and the dowry he gave to his elder daughter was not anywhere near what a Zaildar's son should expect.

The black tongues continued with their one *bhani* or another but they did not have any effect on the seasoned elderliness of either Zaildar or Nambardar and when the "bad days" were over, an auspicious day was chosen for the marriage.

III

Sawa Mahina, forty days, before the marriage day, the festivities began in both the houses. This waiting and expecting period of *saha* was both very auspicious and critical. The girl and the boy were not allowed to go out for fear of evil eye and for any untowardly happening. The girls remained at home in any case. So it was the boy whose movements were very carefully watched and controlled. The neighbourhood women gathered and ceremoniously ground *sawa ser* of wheat. This little quiet ceremony, *jog jhona*, marked the beginning of the preparations for the marriage feasts. Every evening the village girls got together to sing and gossip. At the girl's house, the songs of *suhag* referred to the ensuing separation of Preeto from her father, her mother, her brothers, her sisters, her friends, her buffaloes and her cows, her *peke*, the village of her parents. A girl could neither be married to a boy of the *got* of her father or mother nor in her own village. So Preeto was the daughter of the whole village. She had very rarely left her village and house to go to some festival. And at all these very infrequent sorties she was very carefully chaperoned by her mother or other elder women of the family. This continuous singing and occasional dancing for over a month prepared Preeto psychologically for an entirely new departure in her life. The songs not only reminded her of the sweet memories of her childhood and of the unforgettable pangs of separation but also of what she expected at her in-laws, of her handsome Dipa, of her very important father-in-law, of her quarrelsome mother-in-law and the cute little sister-in-law, Dipa's sister, who yearned to be married but must wait until Dipa's marriage for she was the youngest daughter of the family. The rhythm of these evening singings was intensified and quickened in the last fortnight when the relatives began to pour in at both the houses. At Dipa's house the evening songs referred mostly to love, romance and heroism. Her sister, Jito, was proud of her brother who was going to marry the most beautiful girl of the region, a *Hir*, the legendary romantic heroine of the Punjabis. These songs are called *ghorian* for Dipa will head the marriage party on a horse (mare), *ghori*. Jito's father's house would be fortunate and prosperous with the arrival of such a pretty and able bride as Preeto. The girls teased Dipa and reminded him of the wonderfully romantic life he was going to lead. His Preeto would be the envy of all the boys of the village. His mother would be proud of her daughter-in-law. His sister would be happy to have a lovely friend at home who would initiate her in the secrets of love, romance and marriage. His father would rise in public life with such a noble and strong relationship. His maternal uncle would be happy for the prosperity of his sister's house.

Seven days before the marriage seven small grindstones, *chakkian*, were gathered from the neighbourhood and seven young married girls helped grind *manh di dal*. Seven being auspicious number, each of them moved the handle seven times. With this ground *dal* were prepared *warian*. There was again singing and the distribution of rice and *gur* to all the visitors. When the *halwai*, the confectioner, started making sweets, the first set was offered at the temple outside the village

and the immediate neighbourhood was presented with a few *laddus*. This ceremony was called *palla purna*. A cake or two of *gur* to each house was distributed by the barber's wife, *nain*, as an invitation to the marriage festivities. A special basket was sent to the maternal uncle.

Five days before the marriage seven young married girls ground barley and red *haldi* to prepare *watna* with which Preeto and Dipa were to be annointed before the marriage bath. This ceremony of *haldi bhanana* was followed by the most highly controlled period of *maie paina* when Preeto and Dipa were applied *watna* by the *nain*. After this until *nhai dhoi*, the ceremonial bath, they were not allowed to change clothes or go outside.

A couple of days before marriage arrived the *nanka mel*, the relatives from the side of the maternal uncle. This group was the most important invitees in both the families. Preeto's mother came out to receive her brother and sister-in-law. Oil was poured by the *nain* on both sides of the haweli.

A day before the marriage an orange dress was sent for the mother-in-law of Preeto. This dress is called *sahmna tior*. The same day in the whole village was distributed *halwa*. This day was the day of *roti*.

Before the marriage party left for the village of Preeto, the neighbourhood women came to Dipa's house for *lassi pair*. Dipa's mother had prepared *lassi*, milk mixed with lot of water. The women put their feet in *lassi* and ate sweet rice.

The preparation of the bread, *roti*, began with the married girls pouring water, *pani pauna*, in wheat flour.

IV

And the marriage day was there. It was *basant*, the day of spring and fecundity, mid February, the day of bright, fragrant, yellow flowers and light yellow scarfs and turbans for girls and boys. Dipa was bathed under a PHULKARI by the *nain* and his mother, sisters, cousins, aunts, neighbourhood girls sang *ghorian*. His maternal uncle lifted him from the bathing desk and put on bright new clothes embroidered in gold. He wore a plume on his saffron turban, a sword, a long coat and *churidar* pyjama with beautifully matching *jutti*, shoes. When he mounted the white horse, he was every inch a prince. His brother's and cousins' wives, *bhabis*, applied *surma*, the eye make-up, to his eyes and his sisters held the reins of his horse. Each of them got small presents from Dipa. Of course, for his sister, Jito, there were fifty-one rupees and a dress. Dipa's younger brother acted as *sirbahla* and sat behind him on the horse.

In the afternoon everything was ready for the marriage party to march towards Preeto's village, fifteen miles away. After a prayer at the monument of the ancestors a hundred horses pushed ahead amongst the sweet melodies of the romantic songs of numerous beautifully dressed girls

gathered for the occasion. The marriage party was a marvellous scene. In the mild spring weather, under the vast bright blue skies of the Punjab and surrounded by miles of yellow colza fields, the hundred and one horses jumped and danced and raced in every direction. Jito's brother was a bridegroom in full splendour. His handsome princely bearing could have broken many a lovely heart but it was Preeto who was destined to marry him.

Even though Zaildar Kartar Singh was a strict disciplinarian and had cautioned his brethren, some of the cousins of Deepa got drunk and fell from their horses. They had to be nursed and washed at the next well. Except this minor incident, the marriage party on the whole was fairly well-behaved with as much order as one could expect on such occasions and reached the precincts of the village of Nambardar Baghel Singh an hour before the sunset.

Preeto's uncle, Magher Singh, the barber and three other elders received the marriage party and led them to *janj ghar*, the resting place of all marriage parties near the village *gurudwara*. Within an hour or so the bridegroom and his men had washed and were ready for the *milni* and the dinner. They were conducted to the dining place with the beat of drums and music. When they reached the precincts of the haweli, there was a formal *milni*. It began with the fathers of the bride and the bridegroom shaking hands and embracing and exchanging gifts followed by the maternal uncles and other important elders. At each occasion the gift from the girl's side was quite significant, a precious shawl, a ring, fifty-one or a hundred and one rupees etc. and the boy's side gave only token gifts. The women saw all this spectacle from behind the doors or from the roof-tops of the haweli and the neighbouring houses.

The dinner was sumptuous. It consisted among other items of rice dyed in yellow mixed with all kinds of dry fruits and sweets. The first dinner was called *kuari roti*. Zaildar Kartar Singh enquired if there was any married girl of his *got* in that village and sent her a *thali* full of rice and fruits. That girl was their clan-sister. He also sent a *thali* or *pattal* and eleven rupees for Preeto. This rice was eaten by Preeto and her other unmarried young friends. There was no formal serving of drinks but most of the *janjis*, the marriage party, had had a good deal of liquor which continued even after the dinner was over. This was why very few *janjis* could get up early enough for the *anand karaj*, the formal marriage ceremony.

The next morning seven young married girls brought water from seven different wells of the village in virgin earthen pots for the ritual bath of Preeto. When the *nain* had washed her well amidst the melodious songs of her young friends and received her *lag* of five rupees, Preeto's maternal uncle picked her up in a Phulkari. She was dressed in the wedding robes of *salwar*, *kamiz* and *dupatta*. She put on the red *chura*, twenty-two ivory bracelets, eleven for each hand and the *nath*, the nose ring, brought by the maternal uncle. The beautiful silver bells, *kalira*, for her

hands were from her *masi*, her mother's sister. She was then covered or rather wrapped in the most beautifully embroidered PHULKARI that the family possessed.

The anand karaj, the principal marriage ceremony, was conducted before the *Adi Granth*, the sacred book of the Sikhs. The *ragis*, the singers, had been reciting hymns from the Granth since early hours of the morning. The bridegroom and his party, the *janj*, arrived around eight and others also started gathering under the canopy decorated with phulkaris of various shades and colours. Preeto's *bhabis* and sisters and friends brought her before the Granth where Dipa was already sitting. She was made to bow before the Granth and seated on Dipa's left. Since Preeto was all covered in Phulkari, she could not see anything. With the permission of the Guru the singing of the marriage hymns, *lawan*, began. After the recitation of each hymn, Dipa and Preeto took a round of the Granth, Dipa leading Preeto who was helped take the necessary steps by her father, maternal uncle, brothers and cousins. With the completion of the fourth round the marriage had been solemnized. The Guru was thanked with an assembly prayer. The *parshad* was served and there was a general exchange of greetings for Dipa and Preeto with one, five or eleven rupees to each of them. After the *anand karaj*, Preeto and Dipa exchanged seats, *khare*, and then took seven steps towards north and sat on a stone or a grinding mill.

The four hymns from the Granth which sealed the marriage of Preeto with Dipa referred to the devotee's relation with God, to the union of human soul *atman* with the supreme all comprehending soul *paramatman*. But one wondered whether the symbolism was not being stretched a little too far. The union of Preeto and Dipa had been arranged by their parents and the go-betweens. They had neither ever seen each other before nor were they supposed to. It was basically a family relationship between the family of Nambardar Baghel Singh and that of Zaildar Kartar Singh. After the wedding Preeto was going to live in a joint family where she would have very little if any personal life with Dipa.

Anyway, the ceremonies continued. The *janjis* retired to their resting place and the young friends and cousins of Dipa somehow managed to get drunk again but now nobody was worried about the "impression" and even Zaildar Sahib ignored these minor activities of the youngsters. After all it was marriage and they too had the right to manifest their enthusiasm.

Dipa would have been only too happy to join his cousins but the bridegroom was not a free man. He was taken to the inner quarters of the haweli where he was surrounded by his sisters-in-law, the *salian*, and numerous other young charming girls from the neighbourhood who really gave him a very hard time. Dipa's mother-in-law tried to calm down the mischievous girls. She gave him a *laddu* to eat and tried to reassure him but what could a young bridegroom do before a host of seventy excited damsels. They 'stole' his *jutti* and returned only after he was made to pay a penalty of eleven rupees. They sang *sithanian* and made fun of his father, mother,

sister and other relations. Sithanian were a sort of a social compensation. By giving their daughter the girl's side was socially at a lower level vis-a-vis the boy's side. Through sithanian the girls reminded the bridegroom that he too had a sister to be married and his mother and father could be laughed at. Sithanian and *shand* that the bridegroom had to recite in response warmed up the romantic atmosphere and put everybody at ease. The extreme familiarity was congenial to loosen the tight ropes of the arranged relationship and the young girls-to-be-married had a foretaste of their own affair that was probably not very far away.

While Dipa was enjoying the sweet company of his sisters-in-law the janjis were being entertained by wrestling matches, a juggler and a dancing girl especially invited from Lahore.

The second dining was *khatti roti* as opposed to the *kachi* or *kuari roti*, the virgin meal of the evening before the marriage was solemnized. It included mutton and chicken besides sweet saffron coloured rice with raisins, coconut and sweets. At this juncture there was the ceremony of arresting and releasing of the *janj*, *janj bahnana* and *janj khohlina*. The girls did not allow them to dine until Zaildar Sahib gave them a small present and a *thali*.

Before the *janj* departed with the bride, the dowry for Preeto was displayed for all to see and note. It included besides the colourful wedding bed and chair, the *rangla palang* and *pihra*, *reje*, *darian*, *khes*, *phulkarian*, *razaian*, *sirhane*: all these articles of dowry woven at home by Preeto, her sisters and her mother. The preparations for the dowry had been going on for years. The phulkaris and other articles embroidered by Preeto showed her excellence in art that was duly admired and praised. There were presents of dresses for Dipa, his father, mother, sister, father's sister, mother's sister, maternal uncle and aunts. Since the proportionate relationship depended on a sister-brother cultural opposition, it was always the sister or the brother—bridegroom's sister, bridegroom's father's sister, bridegroom's mother's brother who ranked proportionately high in the relational hierarchy.

The dowry was imposing. Besides all these bright yellow and saffron clothings there was a *wadaigi*, the parting gift, of five hundred and one rupees and considerable jewellery for Preeto but it must be recorded in all fairness that it was not even half of the share of what Preeto's brothers would get from their ancestral property. The daughters could not legally inherit anything. The dowry was not just an affair of the parents. The maternal uncle had given a good part of it and then there were presents from numerous other relatives. Of course, except the gifts of the maternal uncle, all other present were on reciprocal basis that had to be "returned" on the marriage of their daughters or sons. From the boy's side, Preeto's in-laws sent *wari* for her that included five dresses, ear-rings and four gold bracelets for Preeto.

When Preeto was led to her *doli* for departure by her parents, brothers, cousins, sisters and friends there was a lot of weeping and singing. The adieux are always sad but this was a

particularly touching scene. Preeto was leaving her *peke* for the first time for her *sauhre*, the unknown in-laws. But as the songs reminded her father and brother, this had to be done, the daughters must be married, they must go to their own home, the *peke* did not any more belong to her and here she must be only a stranger now.

While Dipa and his *janj* had gone to marry Preeto, the women behind had a jolly good time. The ladies from the side of maternal uncle, *nanakian*, led *giddha* of *nanak chhak*. There was a lot of dancing and singing. At night they came out with *jago*, with small earthen oil lamps, and went from door to door. It was followed by the breaking of *chhaj*, the winnowing basket. They also played *sadh* and *sadhni* and thus made fun of the village sadhu who is invariably the centre of many a romantic village intrigue.

Preeto's *doli* was received by her mother-in-law, the *nain* and other ladies of the house. With a *thali* and a pot of sweet water covered with leaves of *peepal*, Dipa's mother moved her hand seven times around the head of Preeto, *pani warna*, and drank water. On the seventh round Dipa held the pot, *garvi*.

On the arrival of Preeto in the inner quarters of the haweli an old lady gave her some water to drink in a tumbler. This ceremony followed the belief that the bride's comportment would be the same as that of the lady who was chosen for this presentation. The *piala* was followed by *munh juthlauna*, the tasting of seven morceaux of sugar and *ghi*.

Preeto's face was covered with phulkari all this time. She was ceremoniously unveiled by her mother-in-law who gave her a coconut, *laddu* and a pair of ear-rings. At this occasion a number of ladies gave Preeto *shagan* of five or eleven rupees as the degree of relationship required.

After an hour or so there was *got kanala*. The married girls of the same *got* as that of Preeto shared with her sweet rice in a *thali*. This sharing in assured her that she was not alone and she had other "sisters" in the village.

The following morning was an occasion of a very important get-together. All the neighbourhood ladies and girls came for *gane khelna*. Amidst songs of happiness and fulfilment Preeto and Dipa untied the *gana* or *kangan*, the orange wedding thread tied to the wrist, of each other. These *gane* were then thrown in a *prat* full of *lassi*, milk mixed with lot of water. The *nain* who led the ceremony threw a gold coin in the *prat*. Preeto and Dipa tried their hand at getting hold of the coin as soon as possible. During the first two or three attempts Preeto was quite shy and hesitant but when the young girls encouraged her to be more active she was able to get the coin before Dipa could lay his hand on it. These little romantic skirmishes helped the young married couple get over some of the usual inhibitions.

After *gane*, the couple was taken to the monument of the elders, the *smadh* or *matti*. The due reverence paid to the guiding spirit of the ancestors of the family, they played *chhatian*, striking each other seven times with small cotton sticks.

On their return from the *smadh*, there was the ceremony of general unveiling, *ghund chukai*. The younger brother of Dipa sat in Preeto's lap and unveiled her. Preeto gave him eleven rupees. After *ghund chukai* one of the ladies put a baby boy in Preeto's lap with the good wishes that her first child might be a son. At the same time the dowry of Preeto especially her wedding robes and jewelery were shown to the ladies present there. These initiating ceremonies over, Preeto returned to her *peke* the same evening.

Within a week Dipa went to his in-laws to bring Preeto back for her *muklawā*, the first definitive return of the bride. The marriage was consummated only after *muklawā*. In case the girl was very young, before the age of ten, the *muklawā* had to wait for several years. Marriage then was taken as a reinforced engagement. But Preeto was already sixteen and Dipa had crossed seventeen, there was no delay in their *muklawā*.

V

The illusion and reality of married life in a joint family at Basarke did not take long to manifest itself in all its intricate network. Preeto however was not a novice to this system. She had grown up with such indirect gestures of cynical mothers-in-law. Her own mother was no less a dominating lady in the house. The only difference was that at Basarke she was not the all privileged daughter but the daughter-in-law who had to bear the brunt of everything that went wrong in the house.

The *chhoti nuh*, the younger daughter-in-law, was received with all smiles and preferences but the novelty wore off within a couple of months. Dipa was always either in the fields or with his cousins and friends. Even when he came to eat, he stayed, like all men, in the outer quarters, *baithak*, of the haweli. Once in a while he entered the house but he talked mostly to his mother or his sister. There was practically no personal life for the young married couple. Even their conjugal meetings were quite infrequent. In any case Preeto was always within the hearing distance of her mother-in-law or the young sister-in-law who carefully watched every step of the *chhoti nuh*.

Preeto had all the strength that mattered in such a system. She was young, beautiful and very competent in household affairs. She came from a good family. Her dowry was admired by all and everybody was still talking about the reception her father gave to the marriage party, the *janj*. And, in spite of a little critical remark here and there, Preeto's in-laws were really proud of their new relations. Dipa was very happy. His sister, Jito, was enjoying the company of her charming companion but she was the daughter of the house and knew that she could always put her foot down in any matter she liked. And, in any case, every move of the house was under the firm control of her mother. Zaildar Sahib never interfered in such matters.

The haves and have-nots always get together. Within a short time Preeto too had a little group. First there was the elder daughter-in-law and then on one formal occasion or another the young married women from the neighbourhood would get together and discuss their common problems. No daughter-in-law was ever happy with her mother-in-law. This had never happened. There was natural union of the underprivileged daughters-in-law. Preeto, however, was neither that innocent nor that vulnerable. She knew very well that it was her home. Her mother-in-law could go only so far. She had already had a hard time with her elder daughter-in-law. Even her own husband, Zaildar Sahib, was on the side of his daughter-in-law when the fighting came to the bitter end. Everybody blamed the mother-in-law for her stingy attitude in minor little affairs which could easily be ignored. Preeto also knew that the old woman was not going to last for ever. Very soon she would be dragging her feet and after the death of Zaildar Sahib who was not so young either the land would be divided amongst the brothers and Preeto would be the master of her house. This is how it had happened at her *peke*, the same would be at her *sauhre*.

Maybe it was due to infatuation or otherwise, Dipa's younger brother, Preeto's *dior*, Sohna, was always on her side. Jito too was quite careful in her relations. She knew that her parents were like trees on the bank of a stream, *kandi utte rukhre*. She had to count on her brothers and the brothers always listened to their wives.

There was also the question of the status of the mother-in-law. Like any other lady of the house she was married in this family. Everybody knew that it was the second marriage of Zaildar Sahib, she had nothing to be proud of as far as her *peke* were concerned. Zaildar Sahib's mother had often reminded her of her common low stock and of the misfortune of her son whose wedding was such a miserable poor show. The elder daughter-in-law had at several occasions given her mother-in-law her due but even though Preeto knew every detail of the affair she did not bother to enter into such arguments. Her parents had told her to be respectful under all circumstances. A mother-in-law should never be under-estimated even if she were made of clay, *mitti*, as the saying goes. And, the mother-in-law of Preeto was the wife of Zaildar, the chief of the village. She had the entire house under her firm control.

VI

There was a considerable pleasant change in the general atmosphere when it was known that Preeto was expecting. Her mother-in-law took her to the village sadhu, *dere wala sadh*, who blessed her and gave a piece of paper hallowed by sacred words pronounced and inscribed on it. After this she was never left alone. They had to be very careful. Dipa's elder brother's wife had only a daughter who was five years old. She lost her second child after six months of pregnancy. Since then she had no child in spite of all the vows and the talismans from various sources including the one from the *dere wala sadh*. It was quite possible that the tension in that relationship was due to the lack of a son. The *shariks*, Zaildar's brother's family were obviously jealous. They were Zaildar's *adhis*, who had inherited half of the landed property and if there were no issue from the sons of Zaildar, they would inherit the rest. Being the eldest son, Kartar Singh had been appointed Zaildar. His younger brother's sons were their natural rivals.

One had to be always on guard against the evil eye. The most dreaded person was Teju's wife who had no child and was ever busy with all sorts of black magic. The rumour was around that she had often been to the cremation grounds to take bath near the burning corpses. Several times she had offered a goat's head or a chicken and a bottle of liquor to *bhairon*. She had been caught at stealing clothes of new born sons. It is even said that she once stole placenta of a baby boy and ate it. Apparently this was supposed to kill the child and help her conceive but she had not yet met with any success. The expecting mothers were always scared of her inauspicious shadow. Preeto's mother-in-law had warned her about Teju's wife. She had to avoid all supposedly haunted grounds, *pakkian thawan*, in particular the cremation grounds and the old trees on the outskirts of the village that were occupied by the evil spirits of *bhuts* and *jins*. She wore an iron bracelet. She tied an iron lock to her bed and kept fresh water in a virgin earthen pot. Iron and pure water were supposed to frighten away evil spirits. The protective power of iron must have originated at the dawn of the iron age. The black spirits relished dirty, odious things and dwelt in cremation grounds and out-of-way places. They could not stand pure water. Preeto had also tied to her *dupatta*, the head cover, grains of seven different crops. Off and on she would keep leaves of seven fruit-giving trees. All these associations with fertility and growth were obviously very encouraging. Preeto was happy.

After a month or so the barber's wife, *nain*, and two other domestic servants accompanied Preeto to her *peke*. Her mother-in-law had given her two cakes of *gur*, a coconut and a red thread, *khamni*, so that it be known that she was expecting a baby. Her mother received her with all the

necessary auspicious steps. When her father came home in the evening he embraced her. Her brothers, their wives, her sister—everybody was happy. It was a family reunion. She caressed the young calves and buffaloes of the house and enquired after the health of all the neighbours, servants and their children. The neighbourhood ladies came and blessed her.

Meanwhile the metaphysical precautions for her health and for the health of the expected child continued. These precautions were based on the *principle of association*. Everything that was fresh or pure or fertile or fruit-bearing was auspicious. Thus the plants, the water, the seeds or grains, the leaves of fruit-bearing trees, different fruits etc. were all auspicious. Quite frequently Preeto would water the *peepal* tree and accompanied by an elderly lady, preferably her mother, would go to the nearby stream to offer seven different fruits to the running fresh life-giving water. She also took a bath with the water of seven wells mixed with the leaves of seven different trees. She took a vow to bathe five times in the sacred tank of the nearby *gurudwara* on the monthly occasion of *massia*, the dark night, if she were blessed with a son.

On the other hand, she carefully avoided all association, even casual contact, with women who either did not have children or had lost them in childbirth. She did not go out in the dark evenings. During this period not only Preeto but her mother and sister too did not go to visit homes where there was any sad occasion of sickness or death.

During the lying-in period Preeto was confined to her room. There was always a pot of fresh water, seven different grains, *satnaja*, and a blade of iron plough beside her. No unwanted jealous person was ever allowed to enter the inner quarters of the haweli. Her mother kept a strict watch over the movements of all her neighbours and servants. On the roof of her room were spread branches of trees with thorns so that no dog or cat may cross her dwelling.

The midwife came for the delivery. During her final pains Preeto was asked by her to count the bars, *karian*, of the roof. This was supposed to take her mind off the immediate pain. And, after the usual period of pains and precautions the child was born. It was a boy. There was happiness and joy all over the haweli. The midwife sang the song of *wadhaian*, congratulations. She greeted Preeto's mother who gave her a dress and five rupees. After that she went to congratulate Preeto's father, Nambardar Baghel Singh, and was given eleven rupees by the grateful grandfather. All the neighbourhood ladies came to greet Preeto's mother. They were duly received in the room next to that of Preeto and were offered *gur*.

The same day a messenger was sent to inform Preeto's in-laws. The *nai* did not have to say anything. Before he could formally announce the birth of a son in the family, his radiant face had betrayed the happy news. He was welcomed with due respect and was fed or rather overfed with *gur*, sweets, and rice. He was presented with eleven rupees and a *khes*. Dipa's mother was overjoyed. Zaildar Sahib was the happiest man. Dipa's cousins greeted him and took him to the

fields, where they celebrated the occasion with a good deal of liquor. The news of the son spread to the whole village and the ladies gathered to congratulate and eat sweets. *Panjiri*, a mixture of wheat flour, *ghi*, *gur*, almonds and raisins, was especially prepared to be sent to Preeto. And, along with *panjiri* there was a yellow silk dress and a pair of gold ear-rings for Preeto. With all these presents properly tied in a basket, the *nai* took his leave.

VII

During the first eleven "unclean" days after the birth of the child, the mother stayed in her lying-in room. Except the grandmother and the midwife hardly anybody was allowed to enter the place of child-birth. During the pregnancy and after child-birth Preeto was a hallowed or haunted (possessed) person. She was expecting a child who could change the destiny of the family and by the same token a potential danger to his enemies. This may be one of the reasons why on the one hand she had to avoid the evil eye and the evil spirits and on the other hand her own shadow was so powerful that it could make a serpent—an enemy—blind. During the lying-in period of eleven days she was supposed to possess magical powers. She had gone through a terrible experience of life and death that all deliveries represent and was obviously a hallowed person. The passage from death to life or the other way round was always considered to be the most sacred and possessed of protective powers. This was why there were so many magical operations connected with such occasions. All metaphysical preparations were based on the *principle of association*. This was why the placenta after the birth of Preeto's son was carefully hidden in a small pit within the haweli. The barren women were always on the lookout of any article associated with the child or the mother of the child. These articles were stolen and kept in close contact with the hope that the fertility power possessed by fertile women would be transferred to the barren women. The expecting mothers and mothers with children did not let this happen for fear of losing that power.

Anyway, Preeto's mother was well versed in all these precautions and she remained very careful throughout the critical period.

Preeto was happy. She would often look at her son's face and thank God for this wonderful gift. How happy would be Dipa to see his son! She ate the *panjiri* that her in-laws had sent, contemplated her status as the mother of a son and was overjoyed.

Her elder sister, the *masi* of the new born came to greet the little boy and his mother. She gave him *gurhti*, a drop of sweet milk.

On the eleventh day Preeto ceremoniously stepped out of the blessed room where she had given birth to her lovely little boy. She wore the yellow dress and the shining gold ear-rings sent by her in-laws and covered herself in one of the most beautifully embroidered PHULKARI that there ever was.

The place in and around the child-birth was "cleaned" with cow-dung and all the utensils of the house were washed with water boiled with green leaves of *methi*. *Gur* was distributed amongst all the relatives and friends. Preeto continued to repose and contemplate.

After *sawa mahina*, a month and a quarter, there was the ceremonial reading of the Granth. Since the first letter of the hymn before the prayer was "bh", Preeto's son was named Bhira.

One fine evening Dipa arrived to see Bhira and Preeto. This was the most important occasion since their marriage. Dipa took his son in his hands and gazed at him for a long time. It was a miracle. He kissed him several times and held Preeto close to his heart for a while. Preeto was all excited. It was the happiest moment of her life that she could ever imagine.

There was a sumptuous feast for the guest, *prauhna*. This term was used only for the son-in-law. His mother-in-law made a special preparation of sweet rice. In the evening Preeto's brother took Dipa out for drinks. Preeto's mother gave him money but the father, Nambardar Baghel Singh, was not supposed to know it. After two days of drinking and feasting Dipa returned home.

VIII

Bhira was growing fast into a chubby little boy. To protect him from the jealous evil eye he had a *tragi* tied to his waist. There was a *twit* on it that included a piece of paper hallowed by the village sadhu. Also tied with it was a fingernail of a tiger that apparently frightened all evil spirits. But for some reason or another Bhira stopped taking his mother's milk. Preeto's mother went to the sadhu who asked her to make an offering of a white cock, seven pieces of liver of a goat, a yard of red cloth and three pieces of *haldi*. After a few days Bhira was normal again. There was nothing really to worry. Preeto's mother knew all the metaphysical precautions necessary for the health of the child. To protect him from the evil eye she always put a little black mark on his forehead. At times she moved *phatkari* seven times around his head and threw it in fire. When the *phatkari* was burnt the ashes formed the figure of the person who had cast the evil eye. That "figure" was given a due shoe beating. Around his arm was tied a coin that had been thrown over the dead body of an elder person. The transformation from death to protection is already referred

to. Similar protective power is assigned to the ashes of the effigy of Ravana who had abducted Sita, the consort of Rama. There is a virtual struggle amongst hundreds of visitors to get hold of the ashes of the burnt effigy of Ravana who until burning is considered an evil incarnate. Another method to get over the evil eye was to take seven handfuls of dust from a crossing and seven chillies to move seven times around the head of the child and throw it in fire. If the child was sick on every third day, third week or third month the remedy was to place in a *thali* seven flowers, seven earthen lamps, *diwe*, head of a goat, a bottle of liquor and rice and leave this offering at a crossing at sunset when the two times meet, *jadon do wakt milde ne*. If the child was suffering from the disease of "five", *panjwan*, the remedy consisted of making a figure with the clay of the potter and leaving it with five white flowers in the east in the early hours of the day.

The most dreaded disease for children was obviously smallpox. Once a child was under the attack of smallpox, the house was carefully guarded. No menstruating women could come nearby. There could be no frying in the house. There was no washing of clothes or hair. No singing or musical sounds were allowed. Every effort was made to please the goddess of smallpox, the *mata*. She was offered *pure*, crepes. The donkey, the ride of *mata* was fed with the grains of *moth*. Fried *pure* and *gulgule* were offered to *mata* on Tuesday.

If the sparrow sat on the head of a child, it brought disease. If a pigeon flew over him, he recovered. The feather of a peacock kept away the effect of evil eye. At the time of teething, coconut was distributed amongst the neighbourhood children.

Bhira was a fairly healthy baby. On the whole, there was no untoward incident. In any case, no evil eye could pierce through the well controlled precincts of Preeto's mother.

After six months Preeto returned to her in-laws accompanied by her brother and *nai*. She brought with her presents for everybody. There were clothes for Dipa, her mother-in-law, father-in-law, her sister-in-law and some token gifts for all the domestic servants and their children.

The mother of Bhira was very well received by the in-laws and the relatives. The ladies came to give *shagan* of one or five rupees to Bhira. Preeto's mother-in-law offered them sweet *mishri*. Zaildar Sahib was very happy. In a few days he organised the grand feast, *dhaman*. The whole village was invited. When the prayer before the holy Granth was recited and the *parshad* distributed, everybody was treated to an elaborate dinner that was remembered by the invitees for a long time to come.

IX

In August on *Rakhri*, the festival of sisters, Preeto sent a *rakhri*, an orange cotton thread, for her brother's hand who gave her a buffalo. In olden days the presentation of *rakhri* to any man even if he was not real brother obliged him to play the role of the protective social brother throughout his life. The legendary relationship of sister and brother was the most important conceptual factor in upholding social values. Around it moved all concentric circles which determined the status of a woman or a man in society. As a sister expressed herself in a song: when it strikes; it thunders like a cloud; the big black stick of my brother, it is the ferocious protective power of manlihood that symbolises the exemplary brother, *wir*, the term that also means undaunted warrior. The reference to the chivalorous atmosphere of yonder days is obvious.

In November there was *Diwali*, the festival of lights and liquor. In the cities the lights and liquor were usually accompanied by gambling but at Basarke and for that matter in all other villages of Bhatinda liquor was always followed by murder to settle old family scores. Last diwali was a scene of a murder of one of the cousins of Dipa. The accused were freed by the judge on the plea that one of them was shown to be in a civil hospital at the same date and time. Actually it was a forged testimony but there was nothing that could be done. Since the law did not help, the "honour" had to be saved by a counter murder on the following diwali.

Diwali is also the festival of family reunions. All houses are white-washed and cleaned. Sweets are distributed. It is very auspicious to buy a piece of jewelry on this day. At night there are little earthen lamps, *diwe*, all over to celebrate and honour *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth. Since Lakshmi is around everybody tries his hand at winning as much money as possible. The stakes are high but as everywhere Lakshmi has unfortunately never been the consort of any mortal.

In January there was *Lohri*, the festival of winter and camp fires. Children sang and collected log-wood and cakes of cow-dung, *pathian*, to enjoy pop corns and *riorian* by the side of beautifully lit fires on one of the coldest nights of the year. At Basarke Lohri was celebrated with almost as much drinking and eating as diwali but *lohri* was generally not the occasion to settle family feuds though an occasional murder was not ruled out and the police was always on the alert.

The most peaceful festival however was *Basant* in February, the festival of spring and yellow colza flowers. The girls wore yellow scarfs and boys yellow turbans and flew kites. There was always a big fair at the nearby Gurudwara where Guru Gobind Singh had rested for a day on his retreat from Anandpur. On Basant was also the wedding anniversary of Preeto and Dipa. This festival was thus doubly important for the family.

Basant was followed by *Baisakhi* in April. It was the festival of fulfilled desires and life-long promises. With the beginning of harvest the toil and tears of the peasants of Bhatinda were turned into happiness and joy. It was on this day that Guru Gobind Singh administered the *pahul*, the baptism, of the sword to his *Sikhs* and transformed them into the formidable *Khalsa*. With their pockets full of harvest money the devotees throng to the *gurudwaras* to pay homage to the greatest hero of Bhatinda.

After the joys of harvest was the festival of *Tian* in July or Sawan. It was the festival of rain and swings. The village girls got together to sing and swing for hours. *Tian* marked the end of the unbearable hot weather and heralded the hopeful season of peacock dances and dark clouds which formed the refrain of many a romantic song of the girls pining for their brothers and lovers.

X

Meanwhile life at Basarke continued to run its course as usual. The centripetal figure was always the dere wala sadh whose dera or seat of dwelling was on the outskirts of the village. The present sadh, Chela Ram, had inherited the *gaddi*, the "throne", from one *bhuri wala sadh* so known for he covered himself with *bhuri* or a black blanket in both the hot and the cold seasons. A number of miracles were associated with his legendary sejour in Basarke. The most significant was his ability to feed hundreds of people from an empty basket. Once he invited a large number of peasants to help till his land. At noon all of them drank *lassi* from a small pot that apparently had none of it under the cover. A *peepal* tree stood now at the dera where he breathed his last. During rainy season, on the festival of *tian* in July, young girls of the village went to the dera to collect drops of the milk of the *peepal* tree. These milk drops which turned into sweets for the believers fulfilled wishes of the devotees for their marriage, for the gift of a son or for the recovery of their child.

Throughout the year the dera served as the most important meeting place. Of course the majority of those who came for the blessings of the sadh were women who confided in him all their jealousies and their longings, their secret designs and the names of their paramours who did not respond to their discreet advances. All of them got spiritual solace and some specific instructions to abstain from certain foods, take bath at certain hours and of course invariably offer a bottle of liquor, meat (goat or chicken) and coconut to the deity. And besides these very essential psycho-pathologic functions the sadh was friendly to all those who were either upto some mischief or were genuinely worried. As such he knew every detail of each affair of the villagers. No doubt he was "omniscient", he could tell anything.

For their skin diseases the denizens of Basarke went to the *smadh* of *Sidh Baba* to offer a broomstick and a piece of rock salt. Most of them stayed overnight for the sacred vigil. And for the more serious disease of leprosy one had to go to Tarn Taran in Majha to take bath in the holy lake of Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru of the Sikhs who had cured lepers four hundred years ago.

It may be pointed out here that in the healthy environment of open farmland and extremely nourishing diet the physical diseases in Basarke were few and far between. Very often it was an affair of personal entanglement and psychological compunctions which could very easily be handled by a sympathetic sadhu who knew the cultural and personal background very well. And besides the healing touch people came to the dera for the simple reason of socialising. This was perhaps the main reason why an uncle of Dipa, Lachhman Singh, was against all such physical or metaphysical manifestations of psychic traits. Of course Lachhman Singh was an institution by himself. He was not known to have left his farm for the last thirty years. Every morning he would wash his clothes and was always immaculately dressed. Every evening he would consume a bottle of liquor that he had himself brewed. With his long white beard he was a perfect incarnation of the god of piety yet he did not believe in anything and condemned all those who visited sadhus and cities, indulged in court feuds, attended marriage parties or went to the cremation grounds. He was sure that all religions were hollow, all sadhus were corrupt, all women were indulgent and all festivals were bad for youth.

All sorts of people make a village and Basarke was no exception. There was uncle Lachhman Singh who had in a way reached the "age of reason" but there were also people who indulged in all that was considered superfluous by Lachhman Singh. Maghar Singh was one of them. If Lachhman Singh was always busy at his farm, Maghar Singh practically never visited his. Every morning he would go to the city to "help" someone to get his business cleared at the court, at the hospital or at some government office. He would invariably be in every dispute and every intrigue. In short he was interested in everything except his own affairs.

XI

Basarke was never an idle village. There was always some rumour or the other. Preeto had been married in the classical Punjabi manner but off and on one heard of other unions also. When Banta Singh died, his younger brother "married" his widow in a simple ceremony called *chadar pauni* or the union by *chadar*, a white sheet. The affair was approved socially with the saying that the "honour of the house remained in the house". On the other hand when Meju could not get married in spite of all his efforts during the last twenty years because he had no land and nobody was willing to give his daughter to an old hog, he borrowed two hundred rupees from the local money-lender and went to the United Provinces to buy a bride. The bargain apparently was very successful, for Meju had two sons from this union. The *kadesan* was a hard working woman and even though everybody made fun of her queer accent and "silly" manners, Meju's house prospered.

Zaildar Kartar Singh was a prudent old man. He always counselled patience and hard work and a respectful distance from the usual family feuds. Others said that he could easily afford the golden mean of compromise and steady plodding since he had authority and power. At his death the whole village wept and his cremation was attended by the largest crowd ever gathered in the area. Dipa who was now called Gurdeep Singh became Zaildar and Preeto was respectfully denominated Preetam Kaur.

Zaildar Gurdeep Singh and Zaildarni Preetam Kaur had several children and grandchildren. Their eldest son Bhira was a father of two boys and a girl. The other sons and daughters were all blessed by the *dere wala sadh* and all of them were happily married. Zaildar and Zaildarni played with their grandchildren and recounted tales and happenings of the good old days when the world was more sensible, when the elders were respected, when God was feared, when everybody loved each other, when Basarke was a sweet, harmonious village, when uncle Lachhman Singh stayed on his farm away from both *sadhus* and cities and enjoyed sunshine during the cold days of December and a bottle of liquor every evening. Lachhman Singh lived and died on the farm. He was cremated near his well where now stood a small white stone that marked his *smadh*. Every year in January all the ladies of the family would visit his *smadh* to pay their respect to the one who had in his life turned his back on them. They distributed sweets to propitiate the spirit of the man who was not easy to understand when he was around.

XII

Two days before Basant or as the villagers later recalled two days before her marriage anniversary, grandmother Preetam Kaur, wife of Zaildar Gurdeep Singh, breathed her last at the age of approximately seventy-five years. As the records of birth and death were not kept, nobody could tell the exact number of years that Preetam Kaur had spent in this world. Sixty years ago she came to Basarke as the younger daughter-in-law of Zaildar Kartar Singh and the beautiful, charming bride of Dipa. During these sixty long years the world around Basarke had changed considerably. There were signs of roads and technology. The march of hundred and one horses of the wedding parties of the nobles of the area was more of a nostalgia than anything else. The princely bridegrooms on ferocious white horses and the phulkari-clad innocent young brides had given way to timid fellows who could not ride a sickly horse and the young girls were not so innocent any more. Anyway, time must run its course and the past must always be the most glorious period in the history of every individual and society. Basarke too had to submit to the laws of nature and the ever-changing complexes of its culture.

When the end came near, Preetam Kaur was laid on the ground. She was not supposed to breathe her last on her bed. The ground was covered with grass. All the cots and other articles of furniture were taken away and daris and chadars were spread on the ground for the mourners. The grandsons and the grand-daughters cried and all her daughters-in-law and the young married women of the neighbourhood bowed to the corpse of Preetam Kaur and touched her feet with their foreheads. The occasion was obviously sad but there was an element of fulfilment and peace in the atmosphere. On the whole there was no wailing or crying. Off and on one heard the quiet sobbing of a son or a daughter or even a domestic servant. Within an hour the whole village gathered. The *lagi* sped to Preetam Kaur's *peke* to inform her brothers and sisters of the last most important event.

An hour before sunset everything was ready. Preetam Kaur was given the third last ritual bath and she was covered in a coffin that had been brought by her *peke*, her parents' side—this being her last item of the "dowry". Before she was lifted on a bier of four bamboos by her sons, she was covered with a red PHULKARI, the symbol of the happy end, of peace and prosperity, of richness and fulfilment. The sweets, *patase* and *shuhare*, and *paise*, coins, were thrown over her body as it passed through the main street of the village. Careful mothers collected the hallowed coins to protect their children from any evil eye or evil design of nature or culture. It was obvious that anything that touched such a glorious corpse would be a powerful talisman against all evil.

Zaildarni Preetam Kaur's procession continued towards the cremation grounds. She was being carried by her sons with her head towards the village. Only her sons and nephews could help carry her body, her sons-in-law were following behind. When they reached the outskirts of the village, the pall-bearers changed sides. The religious musicians sang hymns of peace in heaven and of solace and encouragement for those who were left behind. When her body was laid on the pyre of wood, it was made sure that her head was towards the north and her feet towards the south.

After a solemn prayer of gratitude and humility before the Guru who was at peace with everyone, all the children, the grand-children and the ladies of the House of Zaildar paid their last respects to the one who was the most important unifying link of the entire family. Then her eldest son, Bhira, bowed with folded hands and eyes full of tears to lit the fire that consumed the mortal remains of the spirit that had already departed but that was to keep all of them in its protective spiritual cover ever after.

There was an overnight vigil at the cremation grounds so that those who deal in black magic and talismans may not steal any bone. The next day the bones, *phul*, of Preetam Kaur were collected and carefully kept in a small red cloth. After two days Bhira and a cousin of his went to a nearby river on whose banks stood the Gurudwara where Guru Gobind Singh had stayed for a few days. They offered the last remains to the pure waters of this very important stream.

Seventeen days after she passed away, on *satarwin*, all the relatives and the villagers gathered for the last ceremonies of Preetam Kaur. The reading of the Holy Granth had been going for seven days. The hymns being sung towards the end were very significant for the occasion. They recalled the temporary nature of human sejour in this world and the permanence of the One Almighty God. They referred to the peace and tranquillity for those who had done good deeds in their worldly days and fear and punishment for those whose behaviour towards others was not so good. The ceremony ended with a long prayer and *parshad*. Zaildar Gurdeep Singh had prepared an elaborate feast for all those who came for the occasion. Presents were given to the priests.

XIII

The death of Preetam Kaur was a rather peaceful, quiet affair. Zaildar's House did not believe in all the metaphysical precautions that were usual in Basarke. Moreover, Preetam Kaur had breathed her last at such a juncture of her life that there was hardly anything that was necessary to ward off evil. She had been always a source of joy and comfort to her family. By the time her worldly days were over she had had all that a person of her stature could ever aspire. But this could obviously be not said about all other ends.

When a young woman died in Basarke, her eyes were carefully closed and nails were hammered in her feet so that she must not think of those she left behind and become a witch to harm her children. This was particularly so when a woman died in child-birth. All these precautions were based on the principle of trans-subconsciousness, *surti*. The consciousness with which a person died was transmitted into its next existence. This is probably the reason why the Tibetan Bhuddhists prepare their death very carefully as far as their conscious ideas during the last moments are concerned so that they may be able to control their following existence. All the rituals from the time of death until the last ceremonies seventeen days after were supposed to help the wandering spirit go peacefully to heaven or simply be in peace with itself and not worry about those with whom it had had social relations. This was also the reason why all unnatural deaths—deaths by accident, deaths in child-birth, suicides etc., were not culturally accepted as normal and specific offerings and prayers were considered necessary to bring tranquillity to their wandering spirits.

All the women who accompanied the dead body took bath before they returned home and entered their quarters with feet backwards. They must not bring along any wandering evil spirit from the cremation grounds. As far as the death of a woman in child-birth was concerned, even her bed and clothes were thrown in the pond outside the village so that there be no association with anything she had. Another fear of association with the spirit of the dead was obvious from the fact that while the body burnt, the skull was carefully broken, *kapal kirya*, to make sure that the spirit really "left" the body and the village. Moreover, the four pall-bearers, *kani*, always remained together for a few days until the remaining bones were offered to the running waters of the river. Those who took these bones, *phul*, to the river kept on repeating to the "bones" to come along with them at every step or every turn so that there be no chance of the spirit forgetting to leave the village. And when the bones were thrown in the water, they said loudly to the departed spirit to stay there and not come back with them.

If a person died with a desire for meat, he would become a wolf in his next existence. If a person died thinking of women, he would become a prostitute. If a person thought of wealth on his death-bed, he would become a snake. If the thoughts of a person in his last moments hovered around children, he would be a pig.

XIV

It may be interesting to follow the outline of hell as it was popular at Basarke in a Punjabi version of the *Garar Puran*. Thirteen days after death, the period during which the relatives may help the wandering spirit, the soldiers of *Yama*, the demon of death, come to carry a person to his final judgement. The route to hell is eighty-six thousand miles long. It is made of brass that is always heated at a very high temperature. There are also thorns on the way. The soldiers of Yama pull the dead on this burning path. There is nothing to eat or to drink. After the hot route, there is the cold route that is always freezing. Those who had been charitable and made offerings to the priests do not suffer but all others are tortured. The Yama Lok is made of hard stone. There are four big gates with golden towers. Inside, there are seven forts where Yama Raja lives with his soldiers. The circumference of this town is four thousand miles. It is studded with gems and diamonds and is always lit. The Dharamraj, the final judge, has his golden temple in it that has one thousand pillars and hundreds of colourful flags. Dharmraj sits on a huge throne. He is attended by scores of ministers who await his orders. Outside, the drums are being beaten and the musicians are playing on flutes. For the sinners, Dharmraj appears as a horrifying, frightening demon, and for the noble and good, he takes the form of a beloved father. The accountants, Chitra and Gupta, have their headquarters on one side. Every night the lamps are lit as if it were diwali. Chitra and Gupta look at the deeds of each spirit and distinguish sinners from saints. On their right is the house of malaria and on their south lives polio. In the west is hunger and cholera and in the north is smallpox. In the north-east dwells head-ache and towards further south is typhoid: Whatever is ordained by Chitra and Gupta is immediately carried and all these diseases are ever-ready to strike at the slightest gesture. Some of the sinners are put through burning wheels. Others are ever boiling in melting iron.

This is how hell was visualised in Basarke. Of course, there was nothing really to worry. There was remedial prescription for every difficulty for the departed spirit of ones beloved. Besides good deeds there were all sorts of *upae* which invariably prescribed a number of complicated offerings to the various deities. Anyone who could afford the prescriptions of the sadhus was assured entry to the all wonderful heaven. However, most of the denizens of Basarke did not bother about hell or heaven. Their primary concern was centred on what happened to them and to their children in Basarke itself. As far as they were concerned, the dead never left the living. The primordial question was to what extent they were beneficial. Everybody was certain that those who died in discomfort and misery would come back to take their revenge and those like Preetam Kaur who had had a most peaceful and rich life would always protect them from all evil designs of nature. The spirits of the ancestors was a living reality. They guided their children in every sphere of

activity and since they knew all men and matters with whom they had lived and died, they could easily decipher the right from the wrong. There was a definite link between the living and the departed. Yesterday, they participated in the social intrigue. Today, they must protect their youngsters from the metaphysical catastrophies.

XV

Two years later Zaildar Gurdeep Singh fell ill and within a week he was no more. Since the departure of Preetam Kaur he was often seen to be sad and contemplative. The wise men and women of the village said that even though Preetam Kaur died a very normal and satisfying death, her departed spirit could not possibly rest in peace while Zaildar was walking in measured steps with his feeble legs of seventy-nine years. The principle of trans-sub-consciousness was always the main guiding rule for all such explanations.

During his last moments Zaildar's body was laid on the ground and when the end came he was covered with a PHULKARI. Bhira was present. When he realised that his father had left to be where his mother was, he sat down and covered his face with his broad hands. Even though he tried to control, the tears rolled down his sad and meditative visage. The ladies of the house got busy with the usual preparations to receive the mourners. In the evening when Bhira bowed with folded hands to touch the feet of his father and then lit the fire that soon went up in high flames, everybody thought of the so short an end to the long story commenced nearly eighty years ago.

On *starwin* the priest invoked the Guru's grace for the everlasting union of the spirits of Zaildar Gurdeep Singh and Zaildarni Preetam Kaur. Parshad was distributed and Preeto's Bhira was formally installed as Zaildar Raghbir Singh with a turban that was presented by his in-laws.

Zaildar and Zaildarni were cremated on their farm where now stood two white stones marking their *smadhis*. Every year on Basant all men, women and children of Basarke came to pay their respects and enjoy the feast given amidst the yellow fields of colza by Zaildar Raghbir Singh to propitiate his ancestors whose protective spirits always ensured good crops and healthy children.

PREETO'S CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE LEGENDS OF THE MEDIAEVAL PUNJAB

The conceptual framework of the legends of the mediaeval Punjab is steeped in lofty romantic phantasies and heroic promises and deeds that invariably move around the mental complex of the ideal prince or the ideal yogi. Time and again the hero reminds his adversaries and his sympathisers that he is like a tiger or a snake or a faqir or a yogi and that like these princes of their respective domains he is not bound by any country or care. His love has the divine sanction. It is absolute, perfect and beyond the norms of this world.

The relation in these legends is exclusive and lofty.* It is like the tiger roaming in the jungle, like the king cobra with its venom and its majesty, like the yogi as the prince of the wilderness. The symbols used to move the tales progressively to their inevitable death-end are all complexes of extreme mystery and extreme piety. The meeting of the lovers at dark night, the serpent, the music, the river and the death—each of them contribute to the desired abstraction and an escape from concrete reality. The mysterious dark night as opposed to the routine affairs of the worldly day, the sleeping serpent used often as a symbol of *kundalini* and the creative force of fertility, the divine music or any other art form that is all spirit and no body, and finally the frightening majestic river with its unfathomable depth and wondrous universe of the fish and the crab—the hero and the heroine being entirely spiritual entities invariably plunge into the eternal waves of the purifying water. Most of these love stories end in death. This seems to be the only way out of the mental complex that moves from extreme voluptuous unions to extreme extinction. It is all very princely, very lofty, very heavenly and the poets of the Bhakti movement were naturally attracted by these heavenly beings.

*Revised version of a paper presented to the students and scholars of the Department of Philosophy, University of Rajasthan, the author is grateful to Professor Daya Krishna for the cordial invitation.

One however fails to understand how the devotional meditations or the conceptual oppositions presented by these romantic legends of the Punjab which in essence and theme are not very different from similar tales in other parts of the country could be taken as models of class struggle. Only the Indian marxists steeped in yogo-princely culture of metaphysical contradictions and convictions could come out with such far-fetched, abstract and spiritual dialectics of class struggle where there is not a trace of such a conflict. What is the semiological distinction between a prince and a yogi? How can there be a conflict between absolute love and ordinary social marriage? Between the absolute and the ordinary there is never a problem. They are complementary. They belong to two different mental worlds and both coexist in perfect harmony. The mere fact that these legends became the spiritual ideals of all householders show that these ideals never posed any threat to the existing values. There is no conceptual opposition between absolute truth and absolute justice represented by these romantic tales and the ordinary, daily routine affairs. As a matter of fact, these ideals are not meant for those who are an integral part of a given social system. For them they are abstract affairs of a world that does not belong to them. Hence, only the yogis, faqirs and bhaktas are supposed to meditate upon them. It is an affair of their social system if one wants to use this term in that context.

If a prince becomes a yogi or a cowherd or a washerman, he remains mentally a prince and the story teller keeps on reminding the audience of the spiritual transformation. As a matter of fact, a prince-yogi or a prince-cowherd is culturally at a higher status than an ordinary prince who marries an ordinary princess as a routine. The yogi-prince never challenges the social values, he just sets up another system of values—the spiritual values which are meant only for him and for his likes. Hence, the event becomes a fairy tale or, if you would, a princely tale.

After the death of his father, Ranjha is mistreated by his brothers who take away all the fertile tract leaving only waste land for him. In disgust and in fancy for Hir, the most beautiful and enchanting daughter of a chieftain across the river, Ranjha leaves his paternal village. He meets Hir and from a little young prince spoiled by his father he transforms himself into a cowherd and amuses Hir and her buffaloes with the sweetest melodies of his heavenly flute. Hir's parents discover the intrigue and in spite of her protests where she quotes Quran in support of her spiritual union with Ranjha, the Kazi marries her off to a Khera boy, Saida, who suffers along with Hir for no fault of his. The tragic figure of Saida has never been a point of reflection for our critics. Ranjha goes to Gorakhnath and from the cowherd with a flute of the Krishna semiological pattern, he becomes a yogi and manages to arrange his voluptuous meetings with Hir out in the "garden". His love for Hir is sanctified by the Panj Pirs and Guru Gorakhnath. He does not require a social justification. It is not a meeting of two human minds. He never comes in conflict with the existing social system. He left his village when there was trouble there. He was not interested in ordinary

agriculture. His mission was lofty and spiritual. Even eloping with Hir did not interest him. He did not want to take any responsibility. Social marriage is for the ordinary human beings, not for the yogis, cowherds and princes.

Even when there is a question of elopement, it never materialises. Mirza takes away Sahiban on the eve of her marriage. They flee on the back of Mirza's horse which for obvious reasons becomes the focal point of the legend. It is the flight of the horse with lightning speed and the unmatched bravery of its master, Mirza, which are the most popular, most sung passages of the whole narrative. And when after this spiritual flight Mirza and Sahiban stop for rest under a tree, the end comes. Sahiban's brothers surprise the lovers. Mirza is sleeping and Sahiban cannot make up her mind as to awake him or not. The flight was only a spiritual phantasy. Now is the time for an existentialist decision. There are several possibilities. On the approach of her brothers, she could simply awaken Mirza and escape and face a life of ordinary togetherness. Or, she could awaken Mirza and let him fight with her brothers. Thirdly, let Mirza be killed by her brothers. There is the conflict between the pious brotherly affection and the sensuous love of Mirza. She was mentally prepared for a flight on a fast horse but she cannot face reality of a normal union. The hesitation continues. The brothers approach the lovers and kill Mirza. One of the morals of this story is taken to be the betrayal by woman. This is however too simplistic a conclusion. The Mirza-Sahiban episode presents a mental complex. It is a conceptual formulation of the threshold of two equally powerful, equally abstract and equally spiritual obsessions.

Let us take the legend of Sohni-Mahinwal. A merchant-prince falls in love with a potter girl. The girl, Sohni, is married off by her parents. Before she was married, the prince became a cowherd, Mahinwal, just like Ranjha, and after her marriage, he transforms himself into a faqir and lives across the river. They arrange their voluptuous meetings on the dark nights. Sohni crosses the river with a pot. Her sister-in-law finds out the sequence and replaces one day the *pakka* pot with a *kaccha* pot. Sohni realises the destiny that awaits her but she must go across the river. The pot dissolves and the fast moving waves of the frightening river engulf her. On hearing the cries of Sohni, Mahinwal also jumps in the river to be united with her for ever.

After voluptuous union there is spiritual extinction. The ideal prince is across the river. On this side of the river is marriage and the social structure. This structure continues as before. There is no conflict. Across the river everything is different. It is heavenly abode meant only for those who pierce the mystery of the dark night and fathom the depth of the all encompassing waters. Across the river is absolute justice and absolute truth. The relation there must by definition go beyond voluptuous celebration. The issue there can be only the mysterious death in the folds of even more mysterious dark night. The waters of the fast moving, ferocious river wash away all earthly realities.

The legend of Puran Bhagat is far more complex and by the same token far more misunderstood. Raja Salwan of Sialkote has a son Puran whom the astrologers declare to be catastrophic for the father unless he is kept away from him for the first twelve years. After these twelve years of training and education of a prince Puran comes to see his father who asks him to go pay respects to his mothers—his own, Ichhran and the other young queen, Lunan whom the Raja had married—bought—in old age. When the captive Lunan meets handsome Puran, she longs for his love. Puran is steadfast in his social role of a “son” to his father’s “wife” and rejects her pleas that they are both young and as she did not give birth to him, she could not be his mother. Puran withstands all that and goes back to his father. Meanwhile Lunan feels insulted and out of spite she concocts a story of Puran’s advances towards her. Raja Salwan cannot stand the “voluptuous desire” of his son towards the woman that is “his” and orders his hands and feet cut and thrown in a well.

After the mystic period of twelve years, Guru Gorakhnath comes to that well and converts Puran to his sect. He easily excels all others in discipline and fortitude. One day Puran is asked to go for alms to the palace of Rani Sundran who like Lunan falls in the voluptuous net of Puran’s handsome figure. She comes to Gorakhnath for an audience and when she realises that the great yogi is highly pleased with her she asks Puran as his gift to her. Gorakhnath had already promised to fulfil her wish. Puran duly follows Sundran to her palace but at the first opportunity escapes and Sundran kills herself by jumping off from the window of the palace. By now Gorakhnath had had enough of this unusually hardy yogi. He asks Puran to go see his aged parents.

As Puran arrives in the garden of his father’s dominion, the withering trees sprout and once again there is life in the wilderness. Salwan and Lunan come to see the renowned yogi whose spiritual touch heals all wounds. They ask to be blessed with a son. Puran probes the past and Salwan realises how Lunan had deceived him. Once again Lunan is humiliated but all is not over. Puran gives her “a grain of rice” with which she would conceive and give birth to a son destined to be a great king—a veritable counterpart of the absolute yogi, Puran. Ichhran also comes and when mother and son meet, she regains her eyesight. Salwan and Lunan plead for Puran’s stay but he bluntly tells that he had had enough at their hands in the past and all their requests are selfish. He then leaves Sialkote for good.

This very complicated legend has often been presented as a simple structure of a woman's lust and Puran's steadfastness. Well, at the manifest structural level it is probably so but when one attempts at a detailed immanent analysis, it appears as an intricate network of egocentric extreme personalities. Lunan, Puran, Raja Salwan, Gorakhnath, Sundran—all are steeped in egocentricism in absolute terms. Both Puran and Lunan take the first episode as a challenge to their very being. Puran is a born disciplinarian. He is steadfast in protecting the social values. Culturally, Lunan is his mother even though there is no biological relation. Lunan is already a highly tragic figure being nothing more than a prisoner of the wealthy king. She feels humbled at being rejected by this young handsome fellow. Puran goes through physical torture and the ordeals of the yogic discipline. Gorakhnath is no less a master. When Puran goes to the palace of Sundran, he reminds him of the honour of the yogic discipline obviously knowing very well what was at stake. The confrontation is with princess Sundran. Challenged as an ordinary yogi, Puran reminds Sundran of the aristocracy of his race. Humiliated, Sundran commits suicide. Here, even the village bard has to show sympathy for her spiritual agony. When Gorakh realises the complexity of this situation he sends Puran to his parents. He knows very well that Puran will meet Lunan but perhaps he has come to the conclusion that no matter how hard and long the penance, the yogi must meet his *maya*. if one must use this term for Lunan, for the final and ultimate release. Yes, there is a confrontation and further humiliation but there is no way out. Puran gives in—there is no other word for this event. How symbolic is the white grain of rice with which Lunan would conceive! The concluding paragraph is transparent. Puran gave Lunan a son and his mother, Ichhran, her eyes. Each got what she had lost and the most important metaphysical event is that it is with these acts that Puran becomes a perfect yogi. He leaves in peace. His mental burden is released. He regains his spiritual balance. His own existentialist meditation had been his greatest enemy. Not for a moment does he forget that he is a prince amongst the yogis, that he must excel all, that he must present himself as an archetype of yogic discipline but like all archetypal yogis beginning with the great Shiva himself his mental self is wrapped in the same paradox that has been the lot of his predecessors—in a way the paradox or complex of all Indian culture that manifests itself in different forms of our collective consciousness.

PREETO'S PHULKARI

Photographs by H.S. Gill

Reproductions by Mehta Offset Works

PREETO'S PHULKARI: SIGNS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The four series of reproductions from the Phulkari of Preeto represent her world of significance. Through bright colours of silk on red or black cotton died and spun at home is embroidered the entire discourse of Punjabi culture. The dominant hue is dark yellow—the colour of happiness and harmony, the colour of colza flowers of Basant, the spring of Punjabi fertility. The red and blue mix with passion and the all encompassing cover of sun and sky. It is the phulkari of celebration, of sanctity, of wild enthusiasm.

The first series of composite squares in different sizes and directions can be taken as masks if one looks at the higher, bigger network as the head-cover and the smaller, lower set as the distant gaze of a being that is leaning either to the right or to the left. The multicoloured squares set one against the other are a number of variations on the nature around. If yellow is the fertile earth and blue is the symbol of the all productive sky and water, red points to the blooming flowers and the bright sun that gives life to them. It is the male counterpart of the female moon that is either green or mauve. These abstract squares of harmonious growth lead to very simple figures of peasants

amidst camels, horses, sparrows and peacocks. In other words, perfect harmony in nature leads to dispersion and wild growth. The regularity of the four sides of the squares in rich colours with broad lines lead to impressionistic figures presented in single or double lines of unitary stitches. These massive, imposing patterns of bright background of sudden burst of nature are in strange conceptual opposition with the humble, meek and hardly noticeable human creatures and their cultural surroundings. The incredibly small size of the three camels and the two peacocks along with the minuscule figures of peasants are almost parallel to the Chinese view of man in nature as seen in many a Chinese painting—a tiny little fellow crossing a bridge surrounded by high mountains. The grandeur of nature is insignificant, incomplete without the presence of human beings however small their physical configuration may be. Inversely, all this harmony, all this perfection represented by interlinking bright squares amounts to blessed nothing if it is not honoured by the small palpitating heart of a simple farmer amidst his camels and his peacocks.

Triangular and square forms closing up in a circle as is the case in this series of reproductions have conceptual significance in a number of cultures. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the triangle is associated with Trinity, representing the three-fold nature of the universe in terms of body, mind and spirit but whereas the unity of this trinity has been a very controversial issue in the dichotomy of spiritual meditation in the Greek and the Roman traditions, this is not so in India. This is why we do not have a two-sided move reaching at one point. All these colours of gaiety form squares with a definite move to end up in a unified, harmonious circle. The number of squares is also very significant. It is always uneven: five, seven or nine. The round, even number represents harmony but the additional odd digit leads this natural whole to the spiritual unity that is both a part of it and encompasses it. The squares concentrating on a circular move refer to the symbol of reproduction, of growth, of fertility. It connotes the female principle of multicoloured hues. In some cultures colours and directions go together. Amongst the Pueblos, east is white, north is yellow, west is blue and south is red. Amongst the Cherokees, red is east and success, blue is north and misfortune, black is west and death and white is south and prosperity. In Europe, the colour of mourning is black. The Punjabi women mourners wear black skirts but generally the colour of sad occasion is white. In China and in imperial Rome also white was always associated with mourning. The Western brides are attired in white gowns but the Punjabi bride is invariably dressed in dark yellow or red or orange. White here is the symbol of widowhood. Our sadhus wear saffron robes of spiritual insignia. The Akalis and the Nihangs, the soldiers of Guru Gobind Singh, wear blue turbans. As such, blue that is generally significant of sky, rain and fertility is transformed into the symbol of the war of righteousness.

The second series of reproductions present a panorama of gold and silver ornaments guarded by beautifully striped serpents. The association of the serpent with wealth and fertility dates back

to prehistoric times. It is the presence of the snakes in most of the legends of creation and the very frequent snake worship in one form or another that shows the traces of aboriginal philosophical significations in the later abstract meditations in India. Serpent has been the symbol of endless flowing waters of eternity. When the oceans were churned, the serpent served as the rope but as the churning was going on, the serpent wanted to spit its venom in the newly created forms. Shiva hurriedly sucked it and until today his neck is blue with the poison that would have destroyed all natural habitation. Shiva thus drank the poison of the Shesh Nag and saved humanity. Jesus Christ too took upon himself all the sins of human beings so that man be free of all bondage.

The nagas or the snakes live in a fabulous world of wealth called *Patala* in the dark nether regions. There are glorious serpents with magnificent hoods, at times as many as five, seven or even a thousand. In their hoods are set bright jewels which lighten up the otherwise sombre regions of the underworld. Ananta, Vasuki, Sankha and Kaliya are some of the chief serpents. The first three are beneficial while Kaliya is vicious. It was Kaliya that was subdued by Krishna. Vishnu sleeps on the one thousand hoods of Ananta. The earth is also held on one of the hoods of Ananta.

Since the snakes shed their skin, they are considered immortal. An old snake can transform itself into any form, human or animal and acquire supernatural powers. The symbol of snake is represented on Rumanian doorway or a Jewish temple as a protective deity. In the Punjab and the Punjab Himalayas, the serpent is the master of heaven and earth and controls all creation and fertility. It is the symbol of all amorous attitudes. In China and Tibet, unicorn signifies virginity and the dragon is often called the fecundating dragon. In Dahomey, the serpent represents a rainbow of good fortune and the instrument that brings or takes away wealth. Amongst the Hopis, the snake dance ceremonies are performed to pray for rain. Ancient Aztec harvest rites included meandering chain dances. It has been suggested that the Greek *geranos*, the French *farandole* and the American square dances are traces of the old rituals of snake worship as god of fertility inherent in the earth and rain. The Maya sacred book, *Popol Vuh*, refers to the plumed serpent together with the three pristine creative divinities who create life and humanity out of immobility and silence cut by the lightning path of Huracan. The serpent effigies of Aztecs are considered to represent incipient life, thunder, growth and agriculture.

The role that the symbol of serpent has played in early cultural meditations is demonstrated well in a Greek fable. On the mount Cyllene, Tiresias separates two serpents in voluptuous embrace. This gesture transforms him into a woman. Seven years later, at the same place, "he" again comes across a pair of serpents and once again "he" separates them and this gesture of his brings him back to his original condition of male. Tiresias is thus the one who knows the

mystery of the nature of both man and woman. This enigma is so significant in the ultimate analysis of human nature that even Zeus and Hera listen to Tiresias' discourse on the subject.

In ancient Indian tradition, Shiva is depicted as Ardhnarishvra or half woman-half man, the one who embodies in himself the metaphysical nature of both woman and man. This is the primordial original concept of the local deity that is considerably altered in later reflections. Shiva as the male procreator with his consort Parvati becomes the most prevalent conceptual reflection. Furthermore, Shiva is also the archetype yogi, the ideal of penance and purity but his thousand years of yogic smadhi must end in a voluptuous night of equal duration with Parvati. The conceptual pendulum from penance to physical celebration is an harmonious continuum. This has been the paradox of our early tradition. On the one hand, the union of Shiva and Parvati was accepted as the most desired union and, on the other, their child Ganesha was not supposed to be an offspring of this union. The gods were affraid of the natural son of Shiva and Parvati. When Parvati heard of this promise, she cursed all other goddesses to the same fate thereby making the entire godly procreation an affair of mental conception. The moral is simple. However pure and sanctified the union of man and woman may be, the pure beings—the gods—cannot be born of this union.

The metaphysical conceptualisation around the institution of Phulkari transforms this notion completely. The cycle of marriage, birth and death is a natural cycle and even though around this cycle there are uneven steps, there are misgivings and mishaps, there are supernatural tidings and psychic cures, the reality of birth and death is an empirical reality where the physical and the spiritual evolve from each other. One never 'excludes the other. The conceptual opposition is complementary and not contradictory.

In mediaeval Punjabi literature, the serpent, the tiger and the sadhu have often been grouped in one conceptual opposition. All these three are the princes of wilderness. They are without fetters, without fear and above all without any responsibility. They are unattained by *maya*, by the deceptions and the dreams of the wordly beings. Their souls are pure, their bodies are invincible. They are the true masters of earth and heaven. They are ideal lovers and true Indian spiritual archetypes. No wonder they are both feared and worshipped by ordinary householders. Their purity is parallel only to water, to the running streams and also to young virgin girls. The bride-to-be is washed with the water of seven wells or seven streams brought by seven virgins in seven unused pots.

All the metaphysical precautions are based on the *principle of association*: purity with cleansing water, clear blue sky, virginity; fertility with water, earth and all the crops and fruits. The married girls keep seven leaves of seven fruit-giving trees. They water plants and give grass to young cows. Serpent worship and plant worship are based on the earliest speculations of man on the process of growth and development in nature. The harmonious forms in squares, circles and

triangles and meditation on abstract forms of crystals and prisms in the later evolution of primitive reflections are traces from our conceptual history.

The third and the fourth series of our reproductions can be taken together. In these we are confronted with the conceptual world of birds and animals and a few figures from the daily Punjabi life. Like air and sky where they fly the birds are always taken as spiritual beings with supernatural powers. The parrot is our standard porte-parole, our truth-teller, our conscience. He knows all the secrets. He keeps watch on all untoward happenings. In legend after legend, it is he who gives the most dramatic turn in every story by revealing the intrigue, the complot. At times he is both the conscience and the life of the princess. She must not only be true to her love but her fate also hangs on the physical vacillations of the parrot which are controlled by the distant lover. A parrot is thus both your friend and your enemy, both your life and your death—like all human relationships in our daily experience.

Other birds carry the news of happiness or hazards as the case may be. A pigeon's main task is to deliver notes of love but its flight over a sick child cures him of the disease. However, a sparrow over the head of a child forebodes sickness. The owl brings disaster and the peacock brings good luck. Along with parrot, peacock has an important role to play. In the Punjab and all over north India, peacock is the symbol of love and fertility. It announces rain and pleasant weather. Its dance signifies the cosmic dance of joy and deep personal attachments. The clouds, the rain, the gardens, the peacock, the young girls on the swings—all present a harmonious rhythm of reproductive nature. In Greece, the peacock was sacred to the goddess Hera. In Java, peacock is considered to be the guardian at the gate of paradise. In modern Europe, however, the feathers of a peacock are considered to be unlucky and its cry is a bad omen. Peacock feathers prevent girls from marrying. In the United States of America, designs of birds or bird decorations on wedding presents are taken as bad omens. How different the semiological patterns can be? Our auspicious phulkaris will be the most inauspicious presents for European and American brides.

Dog and cat have their conceptual domains. It is very bad to kill a cat, she is the charger of the Bengali goddess, Shashti. However, if a cat crosses your way, you must not continue your voyage. In Europe and America, it is the black cat that is considered inauspicious. A black cat must not cross your way but if you own a black cat, it is lucky. However, if a cat washes her face, it brings rain or company. Welsh sailors do not like a cat mewling too much, it portends bad weather and hazardous voyage. In India, the principle of association requires that the young brides keep leaves of fruit-giving trees for fertility but in Transylvania, a cat is brought in a cradle and rocked in the presence of the newlyweds. This is their fertility charm.

In the Punjab, a crow crows to bring company. The married sister longs to see her brother and wants to know if the crow on her roof flies to bring good news of her family. All birds except owl

bring good news in one way or the other. It is a good religious act to feed birds. The bad news of death can come from the otherwise faithful dog. A dog howling constantly at night brings disastrous news. It is especially so if other neighbourhood dogs join him. In Nova Scotia a rooster crowing at the wrong time of night announces death. In Europe, if a woodpecker taps on the house, he brings bad news, often of death.

In the legendary India, no religious offering was complete without the sacrificial horse. It was in search of the sacrificial white horse that the sixty thousand sons of Sagara lost their lives and became finally the cause of the descent of the Ganges from heaven. For the Punjabis, horse is the symbol of manlihood. The most appreciated passage in the narrative of Mirza-Sahiban is Mirza's elopement with Sahiban on his fast and ferocious horse that is the envy of the gods. The camel also figures in the conceptual framework of Punjabi romance. The prince-merchant Punnu was taken away on a camel, Dachi, on whose foot-prints on the sands of the desert Sassi cried in vain for days before she lost her love for ever. The charriot and the elephant refer to the celestial movements and the eight elephants who hold the earth on their heads but for the Punjabis they represent good fortune and prosperity.

The fourth series concentrates on a few but most characteristic symbols of the Punjabi girl's semiological universe. The spinning wheel and the churning of butter-milk for butter have been the two main distinctive features of Punjabi culture. Their impressionistic configuration shows a movement towards their abstract significance beyond the usual productive features. The spinning wheel is the wheel of creation, of steady preparation for the ultimate union with the Lord. The Sufi saints have employed this symbol in their allegoric poems of love and compassion, of sublime union and of the palpitating expecting heart of the beloved. Through the spins of this wheel are created the threads of unity. The dowry and good deeds are often used as associational symbols. On the other hand, if one does not stick to a given spiritual tradition, there is the conceptual transformation from the nature of raw cotton to the culture of sublimated harmony of perfection. Even the melodious sound of the wheel that is the refrain of many a folk song of love and ecstasy point to the eternal hymn of the Creator. The creativity of the spinning wheel and the wheel of the potter are very frequent symbols of the creations of divine forms.

The churning of the butter-milk in the early hours of the morning usually before dawn is not only associated with the earliest movements of earth and heaven and the churning of the oceans but more specifically in our cultural context, this early morning-hour is the hour of the devotees, of the bhaktas. The young girl sitting at the churning wheel partakes in the general atmosphere of serenity and its perfect rhythmic movements. This is the hour of meditation and reflection—not only of the meditation on her spiritual destiny but also her existentialist being in the new family of her in-laws, for this is the only time when she is all alone with herself and with nature.

Preeto's PHULKARI is thus not a simple head-cover to be worn on certain auspicious occasions. On it are embroidered the semiological patterns of the discourse of her cultural destiny. It is a small world where nature is not very distant from culture. However, the conceptual distances are created by the abstract forms of multicoloured squares and circles, impressionistic configurations and the composit blend of all the symbols required for a proportional, harmonious setting of a carefully worked out meditational system. In its extreme simplicity lies its sublimity. The brightness of colours and the parallelism of forms are definitely very high marks of aesthetics but it would indeed be extremely misleading if one did not concentrate on the significance of these marvellous signs. It is certainly not an affair of an assemblage of superstitions. This highly complicated and abstract network of symbols is due to a steady growth of a well-tuned mind and a vision that is both beautiful and incisive. Its conceptual dialectics moves from the most ordinary empirical facts and forms to the most sophisticated abstractions on human nature.

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